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THE IMPERIAL CONFERENCE

BY PHILIP W. WILSON

DURING the month of June, there will gather in London what used to be called "the Colonial" but is now the Imperial Conference of statesmen representing all the self-governing nations within the British sovereignty, and also India. It is not too much to say that the proceedings will determine whether and in what form there is to be for the future a British Empire or as General Smuts would prefer to define it, an alliance of British commonwealths. In waging the Great War, Germany confidently anticipated that this strange and varied association of peoples, African, Asian, European, civilized and barbaric, Hindu and Moslem, Catholic and Protestant, would fall asunder in the shock of defeat, and even in the shock of victory, the political fabric is strained and would be rent if it did not yield to the stress. With Labor threatening the very existence of society in Britain herself and with Ireland in turmoil, Canada is asserting her nationhood as never before, South Africa has fought an election on secession, Australia demands her own foreign policy, India is evolving Home Rule, and Egypt is swept by an Islamic nationalism. In all this, a German would discover plain symptoms of disruption, yet disruption does not take place. The Conference meets to adjust anomalies and distribute authority, not to disband its constituent countries.

When King George reopened the Parliament after the War, with the old gilt coach and the mediaeval ceremonies of a former day, the press of the United States took especial note, because it meant that, with thrones toppling and a Czar butchered, the old show which dates from King Alfred, was going on apparently as if nothing had happened. In describing the France of Louis the XVI, Carlyle has remarked upon the curious persistence of mere form, on which, at Westminster, a Labor member, on first seeing it, said "This will take a lot of abolishing." It will be in this

atmosphere of a dignified and sympathetic antiquity that statesmen of the Dominions will assemble. As Bagehot would have observed, it will impress their minds towards reason and compromise. They will find themselves in the presence, not of England alone, but of one another and in such comradeship, the individuals are flattered. This, indeed, was the real reason why the Dominions assisted Britain in the War. It is only this federation that secures for them a status beyond the status of small peoples. On the League of Nations, as Mr. Newton Rowell, the Canadian delegate at Geneva has confessed, the Dominions could speak with confidence, even against the mother country, because, on the main issue of their nationhood, they had behind them the mother country and each other. While, however, this is undoubtedly the fact, there has now to be considered a second fact, not less important, and this is the relation between these Dominions and the ever-expanding influence of the United States.

Something may be said here about the history of the Imperial Conference. In the 'eighties, the British Throne awoke from the long slumber of Queen Victoria's sorrow for the Prince Consort. A Jubilee was held which for the first time aroused England to a consciousness of the Empire, acquired by her "in a fit of absence of mind." In that year, 1887, the first Colonial Conference was held. A second Conference gathered in 1894 at Ottawa while the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, in 1897, was the occasion for a third Conference, under the vigorous inspiration of Joseph Chamberlain, Colonial Secretary, in whose hands the meetings were moulded into a permanent link between the countries concerned. Amid not a little suspicion on the part of Free Traders who feared a system of preferential tariffs, the Conferences met again in 1902, 1907, and 1911, but the seventh gathering, arranged for the year 1916, had to be cancelled owing to the War; and it is thus ten years since there was a formal discussion of imperial problems by the Prime Ministers in council.

Great Britain, though preoccupied with domestic crises, will have to face in her Dominions a new sense of nationhood which will not be denied expression. They fought in the War and are proud of that achievement. And they are also aware of those heavy public debts which are the heritage of war. They do not

criticize the diplomacy which preceded Britain's entrance into the struggle. But they do say that for the future they must have a voice in any foreign policy for which their armies and navies may be held as guarantors. This attitude will tend to draw Britain, as far as is possible for her, out of European commitments, while it must transform British diplomacy in the Pacific. How the Dominions are to be continuously represented in London is a matter for organization. A Parliament, elected from all parts of the Empire, has often been proposed but is not practicable. An annual Conference might take the Prime Ministers from their duties at home, too frequently for too long absences. In the British Constitution, as unwritten, the Cabinet is, of course, only an informal committee of the Privy Council, summoned at pleasure in the King's name. Dominion Prime Ministers are also Privy Councillors and it is now recognized that, when in London, they have a right to sit with the Cabinet when imperial affairs are discussed. Some device for consultation will thus be arranged, without doubt, in June.

Over certain questions of etiquette in London, the Dominions have developed a firm resolution to see their national status acknowledged. Their claim is that they are now in the fullest sense separate sovereign states which, for historical and other reasons, accept what happens to be an identical allegiance to one sovereign,—that they are therefore the equals of and no longer subordinate to the mother country, as Austria and Hungary were equals in the Dual Monarchy,—and that equals can only sit with equals at the same table. This means that whereas, in the past, the president of the Conference has been the Colonial Secretary for the time being, the chair must be taken for the future by no less a person than the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom himself, meeting his peers. Indeed, there has been for some time a demand by the Dominions for a complete severance or emancipation of their affairs from the Colonial Office in London. They protest against an arrangement in Downing Street which, as they think, puts them on a level with Crown Colonies like Sierra Leone or Jamaica nor are they placated by the creation of a Dominions Department within the Colonial Office. They declare that this is a matter which cannot be settled by putting up a

glass partition in a roomful of first class clerks. Either the Dominions must be allowed to deal with the Prime Minister direct or there must be for them a new and entirely separate Department of State,—a Dominions Office, ranking with the Foreign or War Office in prestige.

With the federation of provinces in Canada, Australia and South Africa, this sense of nationality was bound to develop. It does not mean a desire to leave the Empire. Receptions granted to the Prince of Wales and the recent vote in favor of General Smuts in South Africa show that. It does mean a hope for larger opportunities within the Empire. One can well understand why South Africa did not secede. It was not sentiment that determined her verdict. In the Labor Party and among many Boers, sentiment must have been and indeed was a highly uncertain factor. What kept South Africa loyal was the shrewd conviction that a white minority living in the midst of a black population which also is becoming sentient, will lose nothing and may save much trouble by retaining the background of what is still a great prestige. Similarly, with Australia. In Melbourne as in other English-speaking cities, they have the Irish. Recently, a member of the Commonwealth Parliament, orating in what corresponds to the Hyde Park of that city,—a place where really one may say *anything* that one likes!—advocated leaving the Empire. Prime Minister Hughes read the unhappy man's speech to the House and proposed his suspension therefrom, which was carried. It has been uncertain whether Archbishop Mannix would ever return to Australia and his return depends on his willingness to take the oath of Allegiance.

For the United States, the most vital of these developments are those which are occurring in Canada. There is no doubt that, since the war, the relations between the Dominion and the Republic have become closer. Large numbers of Americans have crossed the frontier into the western provinces of Canada and have there been naturalized, calling themselves "Canadian citizens" rather than "British subjects." Of the movie films shown in Canada, nearly all are American, and of magazines sold in Canada, the same may be said. Seven years ago, Canada was financed by London. To-day, she is financed by New York

and it is with the American dollar that she must match her own Canadian dollar. In Ontario, the Gibraltar of the British connection, there is a loyalty to the connection with Britain which reminds one of the passionate affections of industrial Ulster. And even in Quebec, a rapprochement with the Catholics, let us say of Boston, is prevented by the somewhat distinct racial characteristics of these disciples of a common faith. But Canada is to-day acutely conscious that the balance of trade with the United States is against her and that this adverse balance is reflected in her depreciated exchange. One reason why Canada continues in the British Empire is her wish to find herself on more even terms with her friendly and powerful neighbor.

Statesmen in Canada are claiming to-day that their country is really the stepping-stone between the United States and the rest of the English-speaking world. She is, they say, the country that explains England to America and America to England. One knows that it is so, but it may be suggested also that at this moment an error of diplomacy, whether by Washington or by London, might swing Canada far away from her middle path. The famous remark by Mr. Champ Clark—"annexing Canada"—has recently been echoed in certain less responsible quarters and has evoked warm comments from the Dominion. On the other hand, the Dominion is speaking not less plainly to Britain, especially over the Governor-Generalship which the Duke of Devonshire is vacating. To be frank, it is not quite easy to discover what are the precise qualities in their Governor-General that Canadians want. Is he to be King Log or King Stork? Is he to be a personality or a figurehead? If a figurehead, merely to open bazaars and accept the advice of his Ministers, then there was, after all, something to be said for Queen Mary's brother, the Earl of Athlone, whose name Canada has somewhat decisively turned down. If, contrariwise, the Governor-General is to be a personality who does things, in what sphere is he to act? Broadly, he is coming to be regarded as a kind of Ambassador or Envoy Plenipotentiary from Britain to Canada, whose true function is diplomatic rather than administrative. With the names at present suggested, Canada appears to be dissatisfied. Just as Lord Bryce made it difficult for any British Ambassador to

succeed him at Washington, so Earl Grey, as Governor-General of Canada, set a standard of sympathy and of sagacious tact which has left to others a heritage of perilous comparisons. And Great Britain has rather cleverly turned the tables by inviting Canada herself to make the nomination! We shall see how *that* plan will work out.

In various other matters, Canadians have shown themselves sensitive when corresponding with London. Over the grant of titles, they have put their foot down firmly, insisting that no peerages and baronetcies and knighthoods be conferred upon citizens of the Dominion, save by the advice of the Dominion Government. In intention, this is a simple and wholesome assertion of democracy, but in its effect on the Constitution of the British Empire, it has a deeper meaning. It signifies that the Dominion asserts the right directly to "advise" the King, either through his Governor-General or without any such intermediary, and in any event without reference to the King's British "advisers" or Ministers in London. This is the more important as a precedent because the Imperial Parliament sitting at Westminster has never yet abrogated its right to legislate for any part anywhere of the King's Dominions. For such an abrogation, Canada has not yet asked, but her citizens have made it clear that no Imperial legislation can be accepted by her, save as a freely consenting party thereto, and legislation over her head and against her will would—to quote Mr. Rowell again—lead as certainly to revolution as would the action of the Electoral College in the United States if as delegates the members had voted Governor Cox into the White House instead of Senator Warren G. Harding, against the declared though indirect suffrages of the American people. There is, indeed, a movement in Canada favorable to a fundamental amendment of the British North America Act, which defines the Dominion's constitution. At present, that Act can only be altered by the Imperial Parliament itself, to which supreme legislature the Dominion must make "petition." The very word, "petition" is something of a challenge and many Canadians would prefer to see Canada assume the right to alter her own Constitution when and how she likes. Against this plea, there is in logic nothing to be said, but in prac-

tice, the present system has advantages which Canadians are themselves bound to recognize. After all, the Imperial Parliament listens with great sympathy to any "petition" which may be submitted. And some ill-considered petitions are suitably postponed because there is this technicality to be observed. On the other hand, if Canada is to handle Constitutional changes herself and without any reference to the mother country, she must first secure unanimity between her provinces—by no means a simple matter—which unanimity cannot be superseded, even in secular affairs, because of the solemn guarantees given to Quebec. From the veto enjoyed by Quebec, it follows that every Province has a veto and by a strange inversion of the probabilities, the control of a distant and Imperial Parliament is thus the method by which Canada can escape from the much more serious restraint of a virtually stereotyped Constitution, as it would be if "the control" ceased.

The surviving authority of the Imperial Parliament has its counterpart in the "Judicial Committee of the Privy Council," as it is called, which august though oddly named tribunal of Law Lords, sitting in a back room, is the Supreme Court of the British Empire. It is a body, admittedly venerable and admittedly efficient. It considers a tribal dispute on the northwest frontier of India, where there are none save unwritten laws and customs, and it formulates out of these traditions a common law of definite precedent. The Canadian Courts are themselves undoubtedly most efficient. Yet, on the other side of the case, we have the equally undoubted fact that in British as in Roman jurisprudence there is a heritage shared also by the United States herself; and never in British history have the Courts been more free of abuses and more learnedly served than they are to-day. In a land so rapidly developing as is Canada, there are many issues constantly arising on which a detached arbitration by men of the strongest intellectual calibre may be invaluable. That there should be a wider representation from the Dominions on the Judicial Committee in London is doubtless a very arguable proposition.

More immediately important to human happiness than any or most of these matters is the broader question as to what for the

future should be the foreign policy of the British Dominions. Incidental to this problem is the demand by Canada and more tentatively by Australia for the right to be separately represented in the United States by a Minister at Washington and by Consuls or trade agents elsewhere. The Foreign Office naturally dislikes these proposals, at any rate so far as the separate Legation is concerned, but Canada retorts that her people are not welcomed in the British Civil Service and that she is entitled to a private wire to the State Department. The Government in London has yielded but Canada—having won her point of principle—has not in fact selected the Minister or opened the Legation. To some extent, she may have been deterred by the reorganization of the British Embassy itself which under Sir Auckland Geddes handles Canadian business rapidly and effectively. Also, this is a matter in which after all the United States will have something to say. If Canada has a legation at Washington, what about Newfoundland and South Africa and India? And assuming a settlement in Ireland, what about her? It is one thing for the British Empire to preserve and utilize her own anomalies within herself. It is another thing for her to extend her anomalies into neighboring sovereignties. Even in the League of Nations, the six votes, though often exercised against each other, created prejudice. Also, if Canada is to have a Minister at Washington and to insist on making separate treaties with Foreign Powers, as with France over wine, the United States must send a Minister, so it would seem, to Ottawa and a dual diplomacy would arise. In preferring a request to the State Department the Canadian Minister would be asked inevitably, "Is Great Britain supporting your argument or do you speak only for Canada?" Yet Great Britain might not have been consulted and might regard with entire detachment the prior negotiations, as carried on by Canada. No one can deny that the frontier between Canada and the United States is becoming ever more and more full of significance. It may be woodpulp, it may be prohibition, it may be railroad cars, it may be tariffs, it may be waterpower at Niagara or along the St. Lawrence, it may be the canalization of that river as a route from the Great Lakes to the Atlantic, but in every one of these respects, the frontier is, as it

were, elaborated. Hitherto, it has been the boast that forts and warships—except Mr. Ford's Eagles!—were banished from the frontier. But in waterpower, the two countries are actually partners in the frontier as an economic asset of far-reaching magnitude.

Turning our eyes to the Pacific, we find a situation not less instructive. Between California and British Columbia there is no distinction in the attitude assumed towards Japan. There, at any rate, you have a sentiment which also ignores the frontier. It is a sentiment shared to the full by New Zealand and Australia. For the Japanese, Siberia has proved to be of an inhospitable climate, and the objective of emigration is southwards,—California or the tropical zone of Australia which white men shun. Neither California nor Australia want the Japanese. And the United States, so far as I can gather her view, joins with the British Dominions in desiring no more of an Anglo-Japanese Alliance, however it be safeguarded. That Alliance has been from the first a matter of necessity for Britain rather than choice. In the first instance, if Britain, when approached, had answered Japan in the negative, Germany would have stepped in and taken her place. The Agreements which disposed of the Pacific Islands and Shantung were again Japan's price which the Allies paid because they could do nothing else. But the sympathy of the British Dominions—say over the Yap dispute—lies not with Japan. It is behind the United States. And if the Anglo-Japanese Treaty be renewed—except as a mere memory—it will be against the protests of the Dominions. This means that there is, in the Pacific Ocean, a general but complete mutual feeling between the United States and the Dominions and this feeling—despite all asperities over oil and mandates—will find expression at the Imperial Conference. Of course, something will depend on the demeanor of the United States herself. A readiness to accept her leadership in the Pacific may be diminished by the tone which that leadership adopts, or it may be, as one hopes, strengthened. In the history of the United States, there has been no moment when diplomacy will count for more than it does just now—wisdom needs to be clothed at all times with an infinite patience and tact.

For these reasons, I have never been one who fears the expansion of the American Navy. Many issues are involved, doubtless, in that expansion,—for instance, the now questionable value of the battleship—but among those issues is not British friendliness. The danger to Britain to-day is near home—the submarine, which threatens her food supply and trade routes, and the answer to the submarine is probably the aeroplane. But the recent large reduction of the British Navy as based on the North Sea and the simultaneous concentration of the American Navy in the Pacific Ocean are operations which indicate a new orientation of sea power. Any events which might disturb the Pacific Ocean would bring in the Dominions. For such events, they must be in a state of potential preparation and the first question to be answered is how their coasts are to be held immune from danger. The Dominions cannot support Navies of the largest size. If isolated, their small naval contingents would be an easy prey for any powerful Asiatic opponent. It follows, therefore, that these naval units of the Dominions, stationed in the Pacific Ocean, must be associated with a friendly Navy of a power at least equal to that of any opponent. Such a Navy could only be British or American. Lord Jellicoe has toured the British Empire, presumably with the object of inaugurating a new naval supremacy in the east, based upon Singapore or similar fortress. This scheme has failed of adoption. For Britain it meant two evils—first crushing taxation and secondly the danger of a disastrous and unreal rivalry with the United States in the Pacific.

Britain has thus surrendered her claim “to rule the waves” in the Far East and this means that whatever may or may not be put down on paper, the Navy of the United States is in actual fact the force with which the Dominion contingents will look to coöperating. Asiatic immigration is the only problem of foreign policy which interests Australia but if a “white Australia” is to be preserved, that one problem is fundamental.

For Britain, these affairs would be comparatively simple if it were not for the fact that, in her Empire, there are far more Asiatics than there are whites. At the Imperial Conference as on the League of Nations, India will be represented, and racial equality

becomes at once an implied issue. If Japan had behaved with greater humanity in China and in Korea and had made herself the trusted leader of Asiatic civilization, the position in India might have been exceedingly awkward for all the white races concerned. Britain might have been placed in the position of having to choose between her Oriental and her (racially) European friends. Asia is, however, deeply divided. Japan is feared and her supremacy would mean that for other Asiatics there would be far less of race equality than there will be always under the guidance of the whites. India will not drive out England to make the Mikado king. And this being the case, there is nothing in her relations with India which would prevent Britain from accepting and indeed welcoming closer relations between the United States and the self-governing British Dominions.

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